

‘But I’m not a counsellor’: The nature of role strain experienced by female professors when a student discloses sexual assault and intimate partner violence

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Abstract

Sexual assault and intimate partner violence victimisations are a major concern for the college community. College students who experience victimisation at times turn to their female professors as a listening ear. Due to conflicting role expectations, these professors may experience role strain when responding to student disclosures. This paper presents research in which professors were interviewed regarding student disclosures of sexual assault and intimate partner violence and asked about resulting strain. Findings indicate that professors are at times confused as to their exact role in assisting their students and are personally affected by the disclosures.

Key words: sexual assault, intimate partner violence, victimology, role strain, student disclosures

Introduction

An extensive literature has established that college-aged women are at an increased risk of sexual assault and intimate partner violence (IPV). This literature has focused on identifying the extent of the problem, the consequences, reporting (or non-reporting) of victimisation incidents, strategies for preventing and reducing risk and for effectively responding to victims (see Fisher, Cullen and Turner, 2000; DeKeseredy and Kelly, 1993; Koss, Gidycz and Wisniewski, 1987). As a result, on college campuses throughout the USA there have been significant efforts to educate students about various types of sexual assault and IPV, how they can maximise their safety, and what campus and community resources are available if they, or someone they know, have been victimised.

While the impact on student survivors is of the utmost importance, other individuals that make up the college community may also be affected by students' victimisation. One sub-population that may also be impacted is professors. Recent research suggests that students are disclosing their victimisation experiences to their professors and that these disclosures are negatively affecting them (Branch, Hayes-Smith and Richards, 2009). They found that professors who had formal training and/or who had received multiple student disclosures reported feeling prepared to respond to a student's victimisation experience as well as wanting to feel helpful to the student survivor. Conversely, professors who lacked formal training or had little experience with student disclosures reported feeling ill-prepared and also left the disclosure feeling that they might not have handled the situation as well they could have had they been forewarned that these types of disclosures would happen. All professors reported experiencing some negative consequence, whether guilt, sadness or anger, as a result of hearing about the student's victimisation (Branch, Hayes-Smith and Richards, 2009).

Research suggests that professors teaching courses on sensitive issues like sexual assault and IPV may find that the teaching materials and course content result in emotional responses from students (Durfee and Rosenberg, 2009). Students taking these courses may have a personal connection to the course material and may be more likely to approach their professor about their own victimisation experience.

Students may reach out because they believe their instructor to be an 'expert' on the topic, because the issue is no longer taboo (since it was discussed in class), and/or because they perceive that the instructor will not be judgmental.

(Durfee and Rosenberg, 2009: 104)

The above study also found that the majority of professors in their sample who reported a student disclosure of sexual assault and/or IPV were teaching a course that discussed sensitive issues such as family violence, victimology or gender and crime (Branch, Hayes-Smith and Richards, 2009).

The current research aims to fill a perceived gap in the literature by identifying the extent to which student disclosures of sexual assault and intimate partner violence are a source of work-related strain for faculty, specifically female faculty. We focused on females for two principal reasons. First, female professors may be more likely to be primarily teaching courses that discuss sexual assault/intimate partner violence and research suggests that professors on these courses may experience disclosures. Second, female professors may experience a higher level of disclosure given gendered expectations of providing social support.

Role strain and gender role expectations

The term 'role strain' is described in academic literature as a dissention in an individual's social roles. Social structures are made up of various social roles, and each person generally has numerous roles to fill. Role strain occurs when individuals attempt

to fulfil multiple, conflicting social roles (Marks, 1977; Goode, 1960; Merton, 1951). Role strain can occur across social roles or within one social role. Role strain across social roles would be strain between two different social roles such as work/family strain. However in this study, we examine how role strain occurs within one prescribed social role, that of professor.

As a part of traditional job expectations, faculty at college level are expected to perform multiple roles within their title of 'professor', such as research supervisor, academic adviser, teacher and/or mentor. However, in the interest of students' wellbeing, professors may be called on by their students to perform duties outside their prescribed professional roles. This may result in role strain. For example, when a student discloses a sexual assault, a faculty member may experience role strain because responding to a student's disclosure may be beyond what he or she has envisioned as part of the role of professor. As a further complication, the university may also produce role strain by expecting faculty to handle all situations presented to them regarding students without providing guidance on how to adequately and appropriately respond.

In addition, it is possible that receiving disclosures of sexual assault and intimate partner violence is a unique experience for female faculty members versus male faculty members. Role strain due to student disclosure could be a gendered problem as societal specified gender roles are likely to influence individuals' expectations of how women versus men should perform in their respective occupations (Bem, 1983; West and Zimmerman, 1987). Every day during interactions we recreate gender role stereotypes by 'doing gender' (West and Zimmerman, 1987). In relation to this study, it is reasonable to posit that female professors in general are viewed by students as more open to disclosure because of perceptions of women as support providers. The traditional feminine gender role prescribes that women are responsible for providing support (Bem, 1983). Research has documented that, across the lifespan, women are more likely than men to be both support givers and support receivers. In addition,

women are more likely than men to be both informal supports and formal supports (for example, teachers, nurses, social workers) (Shumaker and Hill, 1991).

Research also suggests that women receive and desire more social support than men and are more likely to acknowledge the need for help or assistance, thereby explicitly fostering socially supportive relationships (Gilligan, 1982; Markward, McMillan and Markward, 2003; Ptacek, Smith and Dodge, 1994). This contention has potential effects for both female students and female faculty. First, research suggests that female students are more likely than males to want to reach out for social support and assistance from a support provider (see Day and Livingstone, 2003; Ptacek, Smith and Dodge, 1994). For example, Day and Livingstone (2003) found that when presented with stressful scenarios female students not only perceived scenarios as more stressful than male students, but also indicated they would be more likely to turn to a support provider. Second, female faculty members may differ from male faculty members in their reactions to disclosure (for example, by expressing more concern for students) and in their personal struggle to maintain objectivity. Women are socialised to cope with stress by seeking out social support more than men (Ptacek Smith and Dodge, 1994). It may therefore be possible that, when compared to male faculty, more female faculty foster an open door policy that encourages students to seek them out as support providers. Thus, female faculty may be experiencing more 'within role strain' than their male counterparts.

The subject of gendered role strain (or role overload) among professional women has been an ongoing concern in the academic literature (see Anderson and Mieztis, 1999; Lease, 1999; Pearson, 2008). Research has demonstrated that individuals experience differences in role expectations based on gender and subsequent role strain across roles between work and home (Hochschild, 1989; Wentling, 1998). For example, in *The Second Shift*, Hochschild (1989) describes how in dual career families it was the women, not the men, who were still expected to maintain the house and be the primary

caretaker. Women, in turn, felt strained as their 'second shift' would begin upon arriving home from a full day of work. A recent qualitative study examining the complex nature of role strain among female faculty demonstrated that family and work roles often conflict and that female faculty must constantly negotiate the delicate balance between work and family (Damiano-Teixeira, 2006). Indeed, research demonstrates how role strain or role overload for professional women is the strongest correlate of negative psychological wellbeing (Pearson, 2008).

Research has also found some gender differences in work and family role strain among academic faculty. Specifically, male faculty cited more career-oriented strain and female faculty referenced higher levels of family-related strain (Elliott, 2008). Elliott (2008) also found that female faculty and staff reported more role strain than male faculty and that spousal support was more effective in reducing role strain for women than men. However, other research findings indicated that newer or female faculty did not report more job-induced strain or stressors than their male counterparts (Lease, 1999). Overall, the focus has been on role strain experienced across social roles not on strain within a single role. Further exploration of the gender dynamic of role strain is necessary because existing research yields mixed and often complicated results.

As Wentling (1998) has suggested, companies need to take the needs of both male and female employees seriously in order to maintain competitiveness. Higher education institutions (HEIs) in particular are in an advantageous position to manage role strain because they have the 'intellectual capital' necessary to be at the cutting-edge of policies and procedures surrounding the reduction of work strain (Elliott, 2003). That is, university administrations have access to empirical research and can stay abreast of current issues. Arguably, university administrations should serve as examples in attempting to assist professors to establish guidelines for reducing strain in their complex roles as faculty members. A reduction in role strain may also reduce

unsatisfactory job performance by faculty, including reduced productivity, increased rates of turnover or even non-attendance (Karasek and Theorell, 1990).

The present study

The purpose of the present study is to fill the perceived gap in the literature by focusing on the strain experienced by female faculty *within* their single role as a professor. The study used qualitative interviews to open the dialogue about the extent to which female faculty report experiencing strain (without actually asking about strain) in their role as professor when responding to student disclosures of sexual assault and intimate partner violence.

Our research is guided by several questions. First, what kind of mental and emotional taxation do female professors and lecturers report experiencing when students disclose sexual assault and intimate partner violence? Second, do female professors and instructors report feeling clear in their role to respond to the student disclosures? Third, what sources of strain do female professors and lecturers report experiencing after a student discloses sexual assault or intimate partner violence?

Methods

Participants

The participants in this study consisted of 26 female professors and lecturers who had received a student disclosure of sexual assault or intimate partner violence. Agreement to participate was obtained during the summer of 2009 in the USA. Most of the participants were from the USA, a few were international. Each participant responded to

a solicitation email posted on two professional criminology listservs.¹ Professors and lecturers taught in a variety of departments (for example, Sociology, Women Studies, Criminology and Criminal Justice, Psychology, English) and all identified themselves as Caucasian. The participants ranged from 27 years to 68 years, with a mean age of 44.04 years (SD=12.85). Participants reported teaching for an average of 11.02 years (SD=9.81), with the range from 1 to 37.5 years. Half of the participants (n=13) reported having tenure. In addition, 31 per cent (8) of the participants felt that the last student who had disclosed to them was in crisis.

Procedure justifications

Qualitative content analysis was used in order to gain insight into the unique experiences of female professors and lecturers who had received a disclosure of sexual assault or intimate partner violence from a student. Content analysis requires careful consideration of data to link codes with words or passages within the text in order to explore overarching themes and/or patterns. According to Berg (2004: 228), content analysis can be a useful method for 'identifying, organising, indexing, and retrieving data'.

Content analysis may encompass the investigation of either manifest content or latent content, or it may examine both. 'Manifest content refers to those elements that are physically present and countable while latent content refers to an interpretive reading of the symbolism underlying the physically presented data' (Berg, 2004: 229). As suggested by Berg (2004), a combined analysis of both manifest and latent content of each interview was performed.

¹ The solicitation was placed on a listserv and originally we expected both male and female professors. We received so few male participants that we were not able to conduct a gender comparison and therefore dropped them from this analysis.

Qualitative data were obtained from semi-structured, open-ended telephone interviews. The average interview was 30.3 minutes (SD=13.6) and ranged from 17 to 74 minutes. The interview consisted of 39 questions that sought information about the disclosure and about how the disclosure unfolded, feelings and reactions to the assault disclosure, the experience of assisting the survivor and the impact the disclosure had on the participants. Oral consent was obtained from each interviewee to participate in the study and to have the conversation tape-recorded. The recorder with the audio files was kept in a locked file cabinet and was transcribed within 48 hours, after which the audio files were erased. Transcribed interviews did not contain any identifying information.

Analysis procedures

Content analysis was conducted utilising Atlas.ti V5.0 (Muhr, 2004), a qualitative data-management package. Each transcript was uploaded to an Atlas.ti database and then electronically coded by two researchers.

Analysis unfolded over several phases. First, the coders independently read each transcript to explore the latent content and overall tone of the interview. Using Atlas.ti, coders wrote electronic memos for each transcript concerning their first impression of the professors' responses. Coders established the overall theme(s) of the interview pertaining to sources of role strain. These concepts became a set of key constructs or 'codes'. After this initial step, both researchers discussed their individual coding in order to determine a unified coding schema that could be followed, resulting in complete inter-rater reliability.

Next, each transcript was reread according to the coding sheet and manifest content (words or phrases in the text) was attached to the correct codes. Frequencies for each code were continuously calculated by Atlas.ti's coding tool, which keeps a running count of codes. In addition, passages of the interview containing constructs of interest were identified and highlighted within the text using the 'quotations' tool. Atlas.ti copies

quotations into a separate quotations window so that each passage can be assessed individually as well as simultaneously within the context of other quotations.

Results

Participants described a variety of sources of strain when receiving student disclosures of sexual assault and intimate partner violence. We will focus on the themes that were most pervasive in the participants' responses because each interview included elements of strain. The two major sources of strain included: 1) the professor's degree of training and 2) feelings of isolation from being the sole receiver of disclosures in a department. There were three major effects of strain on the professor: 1) feeling emotionally burdened by the student's story, 2) negotiating one's role as a professor, and 3) effects on teaching and grading.

Sources of strain

A significant source of strain for professors who received student disclosures was their lack of formal training and/or experience as a counsellor or advocate. Respondents (42%) reported that they lacked a clear definition of student's expectations during the disclosure or did not feel qualified or comfortable negotiating a student disclosure. One professor said:

I'm not trained. I can talk to a student but I'm not a psychiatrist or a psychologist and I'm not trained in that and I don't feel comfortable ... I mean other students who have been in difficult situations where they needed legal help there I can refer them much more easily but here ... But hey listen. Here she needed to have a psychiatrist or psychologist to sit down and walk it through with her.

Another revealed:

I really worried about that [harming the student] during the situation because it was like I'm not a trained psychologist. I'm not a crisis intervention person. I've had a couple of classes where we've talked about you know violence against women ... okay so I know the academic side of things.

However, those professors who had training as an advocate or clinician also reported feeling strain because they had to initiate boundaries as a professor that they did not as a counsellor or advocate. Professors (23%) reported that their clinical or advocate role was clearly laid out and defined through formal training but that they did not know what their role was as a professor. One professor explained:

I'm also a trained clinician and, you know, I guess, I kind of went into that mode, um, you do what you can to get the person back on track for a normative life and so that's ... I guess I felt like I had ... I was glad that I was there, that she felt like she could come to me but, um, I also wanted to make sure that she didn't think that I could solve her problems and that I was very focused on helping her find, you know, her voice and resources and sort this out.

Another professor described the challenge: 'Since I'm a therapist now in addition to a professor you know trying to keep those two positions separate.'

In addition, 42 per cent of participants reported a lack of training from the department or administration associated with their strain when dealing with student disclosures. One participant described the need for 'training, training, training. I wish my department had better prepared me to take over the victimology course. It sounds naïve but no one told me that students would be coming to me for advice or as an expert.' Another explained:

Yeah, actually I've often felt that I need some training, uh, that this has become such a regular part of my job and, you know, I talk to my colleagues about it ... I

really know what how to do and I kind of feel like, you know, there should be training for professors and I should probably have a better sense going into this about what I should be doing for these students.

Due to the lack of departmental training and discussion regarding student disclosures, 23 per cent of the participants reported that they felt isolated and like the token person in their department who dealt with these issues. One participant explained: 'I wish that I had spoken with someone but to be honest I didn't know who to talk to about it. My department does not have many people on it that would sympathise with students.' The current theme directly impacts how strain has influenced professors by affecting how they feel and how they act as a teacher after receiving a student disclosure.

Effects on professors

Many participants (38%) reported feeling strain because of being emotionally burdened by student's disclosures. One explained:

You just say I hope everything's okay and you get the help you need and let me know but it's just not anything like standing face to face with a kid or you know ... like I'll never forget the moment I offered her a hug before I went back to my class and she just sobbed and like you know that ... that's kind of permanently in the brain now.

Another reported:

I mean there was a period ... there was a semester when I was having nightmares because you know I was carrying their stories home with me. It was this real emotional burden for me at times.

Another revealed:

After she left I felt really angry ... angry that this keeps happening to college women. I found myself walking around campus and being angry and wondering if one of the young men that I taught had committed this assault ... it is hard for me to not think about their stories when I go home at night.

Another theme was that professors (19%) reported feeling strain negotiating their role as professor after a student disclosure. Professors still have to see students after they disclose victimisation and sometimes may even have to interact with the perpetrator. One professor said:

It was ... no one told me that my role was different but it needed to be different because I need ... it's hard. I haven't explicated this before, um ... the students are coming to you for help and I connect them with resources, but in a way I need to have more distance I feel like then when I'm a domestic violence advocate because I have to have a continuing relationship with them in the classroom.

Professors also reported feeling concerned about the general classroom environment being safe and hospitable for both survivors and other students. Respondents (31%) reported feeling strain about how to teach sensitive topics after receiving a disclosure. Professors reported that, although they approached sensitive topics carefully, it was difficult to retain an open classroom environment without fearing for survivors' wellbeing. One professor revealed this about teaching sensitive topics after receiving a disclosure:

And since then, I mean, I've thought about her, um, pretty regularly so I think that ... um ... that this is something that ... teaching victimology is ... it's so complex because it brings up a lot of these issues for students that I talk about it in terms

of the textbook but ... but these students ... you know, it really does affect a lot of people's lives ...

Facilitating insensitive students in classes was also a significant source of stress for participants. Professors (15%) reported worrying about how to handle students who made insensitive or hostile comments in class over the course of a semester. One stated:

I often wonder about ... in teaching the class. The class on domestic violence, I worry about students that have survivor experience as being stressed or traumatised or whatever by class because you always have a number of insensitive students in the class and there was one particular one last term that was very vocal.

Another 15 per cent of participants reported feeling strain as a result of students disclosing during a class lecture or class discussion. In situations where a student disclosed in class, professors felt strain in simultaneously facilitating the student survivor as well as the rest of the class. One professor revealed:

Sometimes they just raise their hand and they say things that they shouldn't say in class ... You know, you don't want to cut them off and make them feel, you know, diminished by their disclosure, especially if you think ... You don't immediately want to make them feel like an idiot for saying it but, boy, you have to protect the other students in the class from hearing some of these things and feeling like they have to respond.

Professors (19%) also described feeling strain in negotiating the difficult position of grading assignments from students who had disclosed. Often, students used writing assignments as a vehicle to disclose or continue to work through a victimisation

experience. Professors reported feeling strain because, while they were responsible for grading the academic quality of assignments, they did not want to shut a survivor down. One participant reflected:

Here I'm grading her on her ... on her lack of documentation and MLA form when here's someone who's in pain and needs help and ... of course she was saying what had happened to her and what she did and so her source was herself.

Another professor questioned: 'You know, can you imagine being a rape victim and then being graded ... and get an F or a D ...?' Another revealed: 'It was kind of difficult marking her down, um, given that I knew, kind of, what it had kind of took to write the assignment, yeah ... um ... so yeah, it was a little bit difficult to negotiate.'

Discussion

It is clear from this research that even though faculty are experiencing complex and different forms of strain the issue of strain is ever-present among all who receive disclosures of sexual assault and intimate partner violence. Some may question whether it is even appropriate for a professor to engage with a student in the disclosure process. Many faculty members may say it is not part of their job. However, Campbell (2002) emphasises in her book, *Emotionally Involved*, the importance of balancing both thinking and feeling in one's research and the potential symbiosis that can develop between the emotional and cognitive. While Campbell (2002) suggests that researching rape affects how researchers view the world and their worldview impacts participants, we posit that teaching and researching sensitive topics shapes professors' views and in turn influences how their students frame sensitive issues.

Research on sexual assault and intimate partner violence shows the importance of family/friend support systems for survivors of sexual violence (Ahrens, 2006). Whether it

is a professors' job to assist students is not the question because disclosures are happening. Students *are* approaching their female professors for support after a sexual assault or intimate partner victimisation. How a professor reacts could be imperative to the survivor's recovery, especially if the professor is the first person the student has told about their experience (Durfee and Rosenberg, 2009). For example, if the professor appears to disbelieve the student, she may blame herself for the assault.

The policy implications here are clear: first, openly discuss the possibility of student disclosures of sensitive topics within the university community (faculty, administration, etc). Simply opening dialogue between faculty, staff and administration could serve to reduce some of the role strain experienced by faculty. Some participants reported feeling isolated from the rest of their department because they believed they were the only faculty member dealing with disclosures. As HEIs are primarily run by males, female faculty members may try to avoid all emotional responses because they could be viewed as too feminine. Without a support system, many professors could be internalising the emotions and strain they experience from hearing disclosures from their students. Research has documented that professors experience strain between work and family roles and that this stress can cause psychological distress and impaired job performance (Elliott, 2003; Pearson, 2008). Research has suggested that institutional norms and rules have a great influence on how faculty and students behave (Goodyear, Crego and Johnston, 1992). Such discussions would not only serve the purpose of sharing experiences of seasoned faculty but also indicate to faculty at large that this is a community-wide problem and they are not alone.

Second, faculty might benefit from training and practice in addressing ethical issues concerning student disclosures. Due to the prevalence of sexual assault/intimate partner violence on college campuses, and the implementation of both reactive and preventative programmes, programmes that assist faculty are a logical next step (see Fisher, Cullen and Turner, 2000; DeKeseredy and Kelly, 1993; Koss, Gidycz and

Wisniewski, 1987). HEIs should be taking the lead in proper programming as they are usually more privy to the proper information than the rest of the business world (Elliott, 2003). Indeed, Rupert and Holmes (1997) recommended that greater efforts should be taken to educate and sensitise faculty to ethical issues associated with faculty–student relationships. One such example is the Safe Zone program (<http://safezonefoundation.tripod.com/id27.html>), designed to teach faculty and staff how to handle LGBT issues. Something similar could be created to train professors how to effectively deal with disclosures of sexual violence. The intent would be to increase faculty awareness, understanding of and sensitivity to this issue, to establish expectations for ethical behaviour, and to increase the likelihood that problematic responses and relationships will be more readily identified and addressed.

The effects of disclosures on teaching were partly highlighted in this study, but we did not specifically address how these have changed/influenced professors' teaching practices or pedagogy. A few lecturers noted that it was difficult to grade papers where a student disclosed. In addition, many professors stated how having students disclose made them change their teaching or their syllabuses in order to be sensitive to potential victims in the class. Future research could address how students disclosing specifically affects (if it does) professors' teaching.

The topic of faculty role strain should be further explored as our findings suggest that it may be more complicated than existing research has revealed. For example, participants consistently indicated that a significant source of strain was the perception that students expected them to be a counsellor; however, students' actual needs have yet to be disentangled from professors' perceptions. Future research should examine students' expectations when disclosing to a professor.

As in all research, this study is not without limitations. One important caveat to our findings is our use of a convenience sample and resulting inclusion of only female

faculty. Future research should gather a generalisable sample to investigate how prevalent student disclosures are and if they are indeed gender- and topic-specific: that is, are only female faculty members who teach sensitive topics receiving disclosures or is it a larger, university-wide phenomenon due to the prevalence of violence against women? The greatest strength of the current study is its creation of dialogue about the strain faculty experience as a result of student disclosures of sexual assault and intimate partner violence. This increased awareness can provide a foundation for additional research and the development of programmes and policies that address this population's specific needs.

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